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Linguistic needs in virtual communication and labour mobility: CoMoViWo Project.

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Abstract

The market economy, which is the driving force behind recent changes in the working dynamics of businesses and institutions, is compelling stakeholders in education to facilitate the acquisition of communicative competency in a second or foreign language as a means of preparing the workforce for mobile or virtual work. The CoMoViWo project, financed by the European Union's Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA), aims to improve the employability of graduates by developing literacy training for virtual communication. The innovative aspect of this project is the fusion of communication, technology and multiculturalism in association with business enterprises. The present study focuses on the first phase of the project, whose aim is to obtain information concerning the real needs detected in mobility and virtual communication in the workplace. After a preliminary study of the literature it was found that one of the most common instruments for carrying out needs analyses was the questionnaire. Therefore, the questionnaire was taken as a tool for the present study. As a result of the fieldwork carried out in the elaboration and filtering of the items in the questionnaire, the validity of the instrument was verified. The questionnaires were then piloted in the different companies involved in the project. Analysis of the results provided the necessary feedback for the design of the prototype of intensive modules to improve the use of a foreign language in a virtual and mobile context in the workplace, which is the ultimate objective of the present project.

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1. Introduction

The current academic and labour context forces professionals in the education sector to research on appropriate forms of training that are versatile and facilitate effective communication in a second language in virtual work environments and labour mobility. Most companies immersed in a workflow that takes them beyond the group at local and international levels or for networking, have these communication needs (Waldeck et al., 2012). Lam et al. (2013) define this new work context as volatile, intercultural and multilingual.

In this framework, the project CoMoViWo (Communication in Mobile and Virtual Work), funded by the Education Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) of the European Union, has been set up with the fundamental objective of improving the employability of graduates and professionals by connecting active staff through virtual media language literacy training.

The present study focuses on the design of an instrument that detects the needs of the employees that use virtual communication in the workplace; a second stage of the study will design virtual modules for language training.

Current social and technological advances steer enterprises towards a new type of organization based on innovation through self-managing work teams, with more flexible labour practices and based on multitasking. The communication and multicultural competencies demanded are part of the interpersonal dimension that together with the individual dimension and networking, constitute the three dimensions that conform innovation competencies (Watts et al., 2013).

According to Newton and Kusmiereczyk (2011) recent research in language teaching at the workplace shows the following tendencies:

1. Ethnographic data collection in situ for the purpose of describing workplace discourses in particular settings, as set forth by Franklin (2007). Thus, apart from communicative abilities in English, other requirements such as sociopragmatic competencies and the capacity to communicate in different contexts are imposed.
2. Second, research increasingly focuses on interpersonal, informal workplace communication (e.g., Yates, 2008). Yates (2008), for example, highlights the importance of routine interaction in the workplace or the interculturality implied by this interaction (Tomalin, 2009). The sociopragmatic dimension in the workplace is of great interest mainly to second language students. Instruction on the sociopragmatic dimension is performed through the identification of pragmatic resources in interactions by means of simulation and gaming (Pérez-Sabater y Montero Fleta, 2014; García-Carbonell et al., 2014).
3. The third trend, and one that mirrors the attention to interpersonal communication in the workplace noted earlier, is toward pedagogic approaches that prioritize awareness raising (Newton, 2007), including critical language awareness (Guo, 2009) and development of analytic skills for increasing sensitivity to the sociopragmatic dimensions of communication in particular workplace settings (Holmes, 2005a; Riddiford & Newton, 2010; Yates, 2008). It should be noted that such developments aim to complement rather than replace the learning of the specialized vocabulary and formal registers of a chosen vocation.
4. The implementation of pedagogic approaches in interpersonal communication that prioritize language awareness raising together with critical multimedia literacy (Guo, 2009) and the development of analytic skills to make the workforce become more aware of the sociopragmatic dimension of communication. Guo (2009) recommends that employment preparation programs should focus more on the language required in the workplace rather than on what they narrowly call 'linguistic training'.
5. Research on the discursive needs of a job interview and the challenges posed by intercultural interviews, mainly interviews to immigrants or candidates of ethnic minorities. Power relations are also a fundamental aspect in the teaching of job skills needed in job interviews (Pérez-Sabater y Montero-Fleta, 2014).

Authors such as Jones and Hafner (2012) claim that the most important factors that affect language learning in the workplace involves the shift from manufacturing to the services sector, the increase in working from home, the shift from traditionally vertical hierarchies to self-directed teams and the increase of migrant workers. All these facts tend to weaken the relation between employees and employers.

The new communication models imply a new form of writing, speaking and understanding in virtual environments. Duff (2008) sees the implications of these changes in language and communication between different companies, globalization, emigration and market pressure and points out that these parameters are associated with

the development of new literacies, new measures of sociolinguistic control and different expectations of the learning and use of a language. Technologies such as document-sharing platforms, instant messaging, teleconferences, email or social networks such as blogs, Facebook, Twitter or Wikis, among others, make virtual work in groups possible at anytime and anywhere, as noted by Jones y Hafner (2012). Thus, research on the language in virtual communication in the workplace, will have to take into account these new characteristics of current workplace contexts and new discursive practices.

Consequently, to help future professionals interact fluidly in the workplace, higher education students must acquire competencies and attitudes that facilitate the development of professional skills such as cooperation among employees and management teams, mutual understanding, negotiation and co-planning (Duff, 2005; Yates y Springall, 2010; Halvorsen, 2013; García-Carbonell et al, 2014; Pérez-Sabater y Montero Fleta, 2014). These new requirements have been identified by a range of institutional directives implemented in educational environments. Among the directives that encourage basic teaching in working contexts are those set forth by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

In the workplace context described above, the CoMoViWo project aims at designing the different learning modules. The chronological steps in the development of CoMoViWo are the following:

- The description of the discursive practices in virtual communication and labour mobility, in a multilingual and multicultural environment by means of a literature review.
- The design and administration of online questionnaires to find out the needs and nuances of virtual communication in professional environments.
- The definition of communication literacy that teachers need to be able to prepare future workers in virtual or labour mobility environments.
- A proposal that will lead to sustainable ways of collaboration between working and academic life.

As in the project run by Taillerfer (2007), CoMoViWo will contribute to connecting language learning in higher education with the professional context. The purpose is to modernize education and training in virtual communication in educational institutions, vocational institutions and in enterprises in order to define the linguistic needs in virtual work and labour mobility environments. By means of virtual learning communities, CoMoViWo establishes a dialogue between enterprises, students and teachers aimed at the acquisition of new skills and competencies related with cooperation and virtual collaboration.

In sum, CoMoViWo defines the needs of employers and employees that use communication in virtual contexts and labour mobility. To this end, the purpose of CoMoViWo is innovation in sociolinguistics through the design of virtual training modules for higher education students, graduates and company staff.

2. Participants

The CoMoViWo project is coordinated by Turku University of Applied Sciences (TUAS). The following institutions participate in the project:

- International Certificate Conference V. (ICC) (Germany)
- Manchester Metropolitan University (United Kingdom)
- Politechnika Gdansk (Poland)
- Universitat Politècnica de València (Spain)

The project benefits from the collaboration of two enterprises, as associates of each participant institution. These enterprises operate on a local, national or international level, both in the public and private sectors and contribute in the different phases of the project as well as with the final task of dissemination and exploitation of the project.

3. Methodology

The methodology used in the first phase of CoMoViWo follows the first five steps of the pattern established by Onwuegbuzie et al. (2010) which is made up of ten steps:

1. Conceptualize the construct of interest.
2. Identify and describe the behaviours that are the base of the constructs.
3. Develop the initial instrument.
4. Administer a pilot-test of the initial instrument
5. Carry out a field-test with the revised instrument.
6. Validate the revised instrument: quantitative analysis.
7. Validate the revised instrument: qualitative analysis.
8. Validate revised instrument: qualitative dominant crossover mixed analysis.
9. Validate revised instrument: quantitative dominant crossover mixed analysis.
10. Evaluate the development of the instrument/construct –evaluation of process and product.

Figure 1 represents the different steps of the methodology in the first phase of the CoMoViWo project followed in the present study and the steps of the second phase that will be carried out in the near future.

The first step of conceptualizing the construct was developed by means of a literature review with the aim of obtaining a critical view of virtual communication, labour mobility, languages and interculturality in workplace contexts. The impact of the changes in communication literacy in working life is described as the result of the omnipresence of social media, the differences in our understanding of cultures and the growth of virtual teams at work. Another objective of the literature review is to identify the most adequate instrument for the study of sociolinguistic needs. The questionnaire was chosen as the most suitable tool to inform about these needs so that academic institutions may be able to develop and deliver the appropriate strategies and responses within their educational models in terms of virtual communication at the workplace.

In the second step, the behaviours that are the base of the construct are identified and described. By means of interviews, observation and open questions, information concerning current practices in virtual communication at the workplace is obtained and the reality of the enterprises that use virtual communication and labour mobility is described.

The third step develops a prototype of the initial instrument; this will be the questionnaire that detects the real linguistic needs in virtual communication, labour mobility and multiculturalism in the workplace. The questionnaire includes personal data such as age, sex, mother tongue, work sector, type of institution –private or public, national or international, size of the enterprise and position held. The second part of the questionnaire enquires about virtual communication platforms in English or the mother tongue; how, when and under which norms are document sharing platforms or email, fora, instant messaging, social networks or teleconferences, among others, used at work.

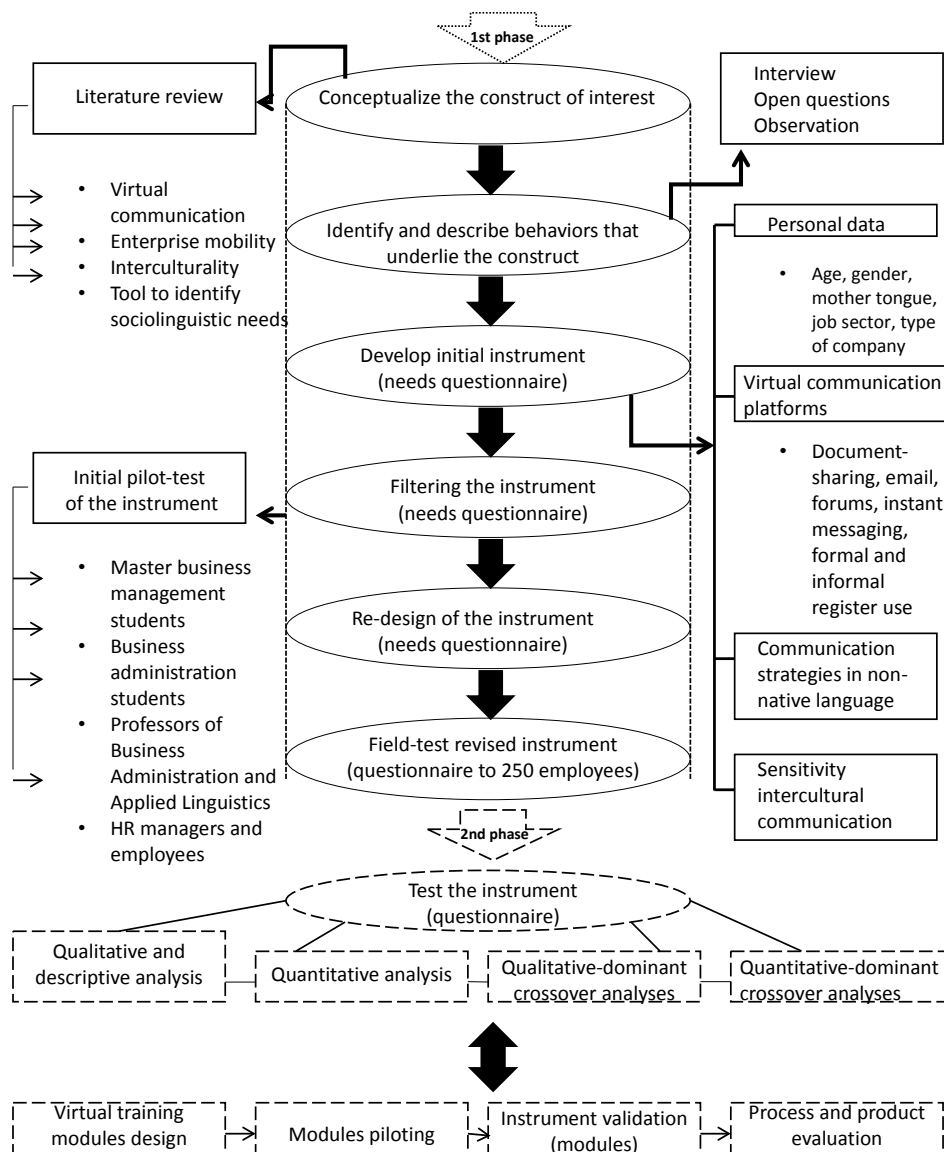


Figure 1. Methodology of the first and second phases of the CoMoViWo Project.

The use of formal and informal registers of the language and the platform in which they are used is another topic covered in this part. A third section enquires about the communicative strategies needed when the language used is not the mother tongue. A fourth and last section surveys intercultural sensitivity in communication at work.

The fourth step filters the items or the questions of the questionnaire prototype. To this end, a filtering process is performed with the help of different groups. On the one hand, 16 students of a Master's degree in Business Management and 20 undergraduate students in their last year of a Business Administration degree. Other groups acting as *beta-testers* are 10 instructors of Business Administration and Applied Linguistics, 4 directors of Human Resources and the employees of one of the enterprises associated with the project, as well as other employees from different companies.

Finally, after analyzing the results, the questions are modified as a result of the needs detected and the questionnaire is redefined in English and in Spanish. Then it is translated into German, Finnish and Polish. The final version of the questionnaire will be administered to 250 employees who would have to fulfil the requirement of being involved in virtual communication, staff mobility and interculturality at work.

4. Results

The result obtained from the first phase of the Project is the questionnaire which will detect by means of a field study among different companies, the actual language needs in virtual communication, work mobility and interculturality in the workplace. The first phase of the CoMoViWo Project will end with the validation of the revised instrument with a quantitative, qualitative and mixed qualitative and quantitative dominant crossover analysis, as well as evaluating the development of the instrument/construct –evaluation of the process and the product–. A second phase will involve the design of the training modules in English and Spanish, based on collaborative learning methodology. Commended this task are the teams of linguists from each one of the project partners. The modules will include content, tasks, assessment criteria and a teacher's guide. These virtual communication modules will be piloted with professionals and students, and once again, the validation of the product and the process will be carried out by means of a quantitative, qualitative and mixed qualitative and quantitative dominant crossover analysis to verify the effectiveness of the instrument.

5. Conclusion

The joint collaboration in the CoMoViWo project involving companies, educators and students with the aim of producing linguistic training modules should contribute to improving virtual communication dynamics, work mobility and intercultural understanding in employment market environments. In academic institutions it is hoped that the modules will provide useful materials for educators for the training and evaluation of sociolinguistic skills. Moreover, they should contribute to improving the possibilities and level of employability of graduates as well as those already working. The main idea is to provide solutions regarding the changing demands of a globalized labour market and guarantee the development of communication skills.

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